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The unearthed

by

Sean Evans

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Creative Writing and the Environment

Program of Study Committee:
Stephen Willard Pett, Major Professor
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Iowa State University
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2013

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A Pilgrimage

I climb
 to a high forgotten palace
 where sunlit motes pillar the dark
 through dragon-tongued rhododendron
 into wild mountain stream
 unimpeded by the forge and piston where
 crude burns only in the once-dreamed
 solitude of its waking, consecrated,
 christened by its own fermentation,
 black vicissitude, diamond ore
 before the flame's conquest

I climb
 a green cathedral birthed
 baptized by underground springs
 inaccessible to all but the eternal
 sanctity of roots.

I climb the stair-cased streambed
 chiseled and sculpted to fit only the unshod

hoof and foot with a shape only
 the heart can trace outcroppings that speak
 the silent ghost of yesterday's weather

where maidenhair fern creeps
 along the ledge to wed the dark
 crevices broken, sifted
 granules relinquish their solemn
 rigidity to lie loose, vulnerable
 among freshets, wind's palpable
 ventricular circumlocution pulsing
 life into cellular hands, branches
 like Shiva's arms waving,
 bowing, chanting pink
 laurel blossomed incense

in praise of sun, in praise of wings flying
 seed over the mountain born again
 another thread woven across the ridge,
 into a universe vast as the microbe,
 infinitesimal as the comet's blind orb,
 omniscient and holy as the beetle's
 esoteric revelations beneath the bark

I climb
a jeweled shadow
where brook trout leap
for gadflies, ghost nymphs,
where a stick fire licks
the outer dark, where
vagrant stars pluck tin
holes in the void's
operatic conclusion,
where great ancient bears
print boulder shapes
across the vaulted sky

I climb
to fish the rivers I fished
before time lassoed the moon around
and lay my head on the simple ground
to dream again what was lost.

It Wasn't My Father in that Casket
for Harold

I didn't stand right away.
 I sat the quiet,
 finished my milk with the clocks.
 The precise hour was uncertain.
 Sometime during the night the heart resisted dialysis.
 Machines can carry us only so far,
 the voice said.

My father loved fishing near Wilson Dam,
 locks and gages barricading the rain of five states,
 trout icing beneath the boat on the bottom.
 Shoulders broad as limestone, casting his line from the bow,
 bicep and elbow mending, making Earth
 fit the feather of a fly.

I don't recall what made me finally stand.
 I pushed myself away from table,
 walked in the living room and eased down on the sofa
 where he would sit for hours, tracking the plains for clouds.
 I didn't turn on the television.
 Beached in the yard,
 forty horse Mercury humped beneath green canvas
 unraveling its fiber in the sun,
 sat his boat.

That night the moon rose in the window above my bed.
 It moved slow and shone round as a perfect stone in the river,
 silver fish spilling to the bottom all around.
 It happened natural and easy

Man on a Roof

The radiator was busted,
so he put a box of rice on the stove,
a brand he never bought.
The directions said three level cups and stir.
The man leaned over the burner and let the heat build,
waiting for steam to rise.
It was their twelfth anniversary.

Life was unkind to the man.
It lived beneath a smokestack,
melting crude into jazz.
The man didn't understand—
it loved rats and cathedrals,
canals; wept for sunlight,
kept dying, coming back,
dying again.

But the man had chosen his bride and kissed her under water;
at nine meters lost his hearing to the deep,
a ballast of clams, an oyster dinner.
When the muscle receded only a shell remained.

Moons and tides came empty,
washing up steak knives and the view from a kitchen window,
so the man climbed a roof on Bourbon,
buttoned his coat,
and swam to the bottom.

Mama's Little Helen

At the crest of a slow, steady climb the burning hood
 of a dark Buick tilts like a sweating rim of iced bourbon
 into sun polluted grove of broad pecan, oak, elegant
 peach balconies of iron lace bulging in the heat like Parisian
 bodices. Liquored sweetness floats down stairwells, begging
 love too big, too bad, too dizzy to ever be had; it slips
 round the corner past midnight and you wonder over coffee
 if you dreamed it, or it dreamed you.

The courthouse presides the heat beneath the hooded phantom
 of a white convertible, quail-shot into hysteria by a Dallas parade—
 a startled whale rising out of bottomland shadow, yellow-fevered,
 armed with mosquito teeth of Sutpen's Hundred, a pillared cloud
 risen of sweat and cane into statutory history loitering the dead.
 Its gaping chandeliered windows still wilt as Faulkner shuffles by

 lewd- mad with genius of nine a.m. Southern Rose

I sneaked into Rowan Oak to hold his black riding boots to my ear,
 a conch shell listening for ghosts beneath the air-conditioned cedar
 while half the town smuggled bourbon into a secret drawer of designer
 ties to wave red flags at a running back heroically shouldering the ball
 past enemy lines.

When the visiting team had bombed us back

to gas-lit alleys
 in bitter defeat
 the underground
 debated

deaf allegiances over Lynchburg whiskey. He was a genius, motherfucker.
 Oh, fuck off. All he ever told was the misery. Played the race card every
 chance he got. Goddamn carpetbagger is what he was. You fucking Judas.
 You coward. Well you can go read it for yourself in the newspaper clippings
 on the walls of his very own home. Hotty Toddy. You swine. *The Sound and
 the Fury* is the only thing of any real value this town ever produced, maybe the
 whole goddamn state, and I can say that because I'm from here. That's when
 she leaned over the bar in her loosely perfumed gown. You could have heard
 owl footprints on the roof. She had Elvis's cheekbones. Eyes burning from
 the fields of Ireland. Vision of all that was woman flowing into our presence
 like a Greek statue. Kind of beauty either ends the argument
 Or starts a war.

I'm no saint, she said. I've hated and loved every voice that ever sang a note

in the beautiful schizophrenic choir you keep calling Dixie. But I know Medgar Evers loved it more than you or I ever did, any of us, even Faulkner, and he'd tell you so himself if you had the spleen to walk out of the bar and go sit in the cemetery

alone
some night
and truly ask.

When she was done, we all turned and watched her walk past the pool tables to the jukebox where she flipped her head back to see that we were all looking, let the coin fall, pressed E-12, and began swaying her hips to the sweet blues notes, rocking her body to and fro as the bottle-slide slickened and poured into night like black, venom heated molasses.

Ruby in the Void

She is
Earth blinking
a green lash
through electric
storm fission.

Light reaching us
from distant objects,
visible, invisible.

A Volcanic yolk
of eons erupting
DNA, a blind archer
and two stoic bears.

Misnomer, the current
consensus of a millisecond,
pure energy and
the black echo
of infinity.

Pythagoras vanishing
in a helium cloud,
powder keg of dust,
nuclear flash, pollinating
elemental gardens, astral
rose

stoking fires
in a black kettle
of cosmic debris.

She is
a sachet
of cool radiation,

boundless
elixir

steeped in light-
years, insoluble
inquiry looming

all that is
threadbare to gold,

sand to stone.

She is
a fig leaf
sprouting camels
through the eye
of a needle.

Isis, dipping her gourd
for rubies in the void.

Eve's celestial shower
of planetary lemons,
searing golden holes
in the rust pail of
time's dark well.

She is
the lame
who fell
from a wild ass
into the arms
of a blind king.

She is
the final cadence,
a purloined wing
shimmering
toward the ultimate
shadow
of midnight's candle.

The ocean
the vessel
the mirror
the violet water bead
stuck to the windshield,
defying gravity, vibrating back
through herself at 800
miles an hour.

Little Bear

There were two lakes, Big Bear and Little Bear, where my father and I hooked striper, rock bass, the red gilled shellcrackers, their bright collage of gilded scales festooning the gunwales, fanning oxygen in the live well mounted into the hull just behind the steering seat. People said the lakes were haunted with Union soldiers murdered in their sleep by a witch who poured molten lead in their eardrums, soldering them forever to that land when their thoughts poured out onto the rock

We'd fish late, trolling the limestone coves, clear black shimmering fingers thrust lengthwise between bluffs, calm surface mirroring sky more accurately than a camera lens, yellowleaf pine canopy and cirrus cloud dragons flickering like flame through the waves, stilling again in reverse replica, as if water held the entire universe

in one eternally floating instant

My father witnessed terrors overseas I'll never understand, or imagine. But I know if he could go back and hold that draftcard again, he'd tuck it into his back pocket as if it were a small child and walk into the kitchen where my grandmother cut biscuits with a water glass. And he'd take the rolling pin from her and quietly explain why he couldn't go. He'd shake hands with my grandfather, a veteran with no tolerance for cowardice, and he'd explain in such a quiet way they'd understand his war was not his father's or the battles his son would fight, because everyone has their own history to shoulder, vast territories no one can ever win or lose but them.

I asked my father on Little Bear if it was true about the ghost who walked the shore in search of sleeping boys. I waited while he baited the hook, threaded the cricket behind its chitinous collar, pinning the silver point back through its abdomen as the tiny barbed legs tried to claw free. I watched him rear back and sling the bait down-shore, the mangled, airborne insect overtaking its own reflection in the sky. When the red and white floater bobbed up and the line tightened again, he lit a cigarette said it was just a story people made up. I looked across the water into the darkening woods and shook my head, as if I'd stumbled into some final revelation.

He breathed smoke as he watched the line. That's not to say it didn't happen just the same, he said, exhaling, poised for the cork to vanish, the cricket lost down in that murky water, fighting for life on the end of a line with no chance ever kicking itself back to shore.

Alligator Gar

You seemed alien as a heartbeat winched up by elbows
 from the brown murk, hauled in on a trotline weighted
 with mortar bricks, devious hooks, barbed and buried
 in a goldfish gut.

You bubbled up reflective and silver-scaled
 like some Precambrian knight of the marsh,
 wanting to sever a finger, a thumb. Your eye
 burned red in the headlamp, fire inside an opal.

I reeled you up and you stared back as only a fish can,
 sedated glass muteness, deadpan, accusatory, godlike
 and wise, pink scar of gills, clam flesh dilating oxygen.

I should have cut you loose when I saw the teeth,
 the jumbled moonlit rows, house of mirrors and
 saws on the water flying toward fingers in the dark.

I should have cut you loose, but it's been drilled in us
 by our fathers that you are bait thieves and to kill you
 before you steal again and take the all the good cat,
 the tender yellow channels who aren't bottom feeders.

So I did, not what I believed, or felt, but what was expected.
 I took the short paddle from the hull by the corroded battery
 without wiping the handle and clubbed until your skull clapped
 out over the water three times and back like the wet slap of a boot
 on vacant pavement, a railcar connecting in the dark, and waited
 while you seized into prehistoric fever, then subsided, slipped
 back to your alien palace below.

Holy Ground

I've often thought them ghosts
 the way they gather
 at the edge of things, hoof prints
 behind a cold sun
 on the slow fall
 of a fallen light, tails sizzling
 orange in the low-lit brush,
 herds, silent gray
 armies
 appearing among the sage
 without rank—

a dozen premonitions drifting
 in their tracks, heads mounted on
 necks, sloughing and bobbing, tasting
 venison in my sweat, stab of gun oil
 on the downwind. They intuit
 unseen intrusion; eyes bugged
 sidelong from the naked brain,
 fawning motionlessness, mineralizing
 to stone, twelve small breaths born
 of thicket, eight-second splints
 of sky

always there
 low in the west
 sun
 percolating their backs,
 dappled
 and holy.

I stood a long time, and shivered
 from a high pine, gripping my carbine,
 trigger slicing sharp against my pulse

forgetting
 the lead ball
 asleep
 in its chamber.

Runners in the Dark

I.

Every Saturday night on this dark bend
in Marshal County, jackrabbits streak blind

cover from boozed headlight beams.
Vehicular homicide, roving dirt rich

bottomland. Blue ridges my mother walked
nine months before I was born, scabbed gray

with diesel tracks, industrial skidders, invasive
beetles. *It was different back then*, she says.

You could walk for miles without hitting clear-cut.
Looks like they tested a bomb up there, or the moon.

Now timber planes fly over, dusting hybridized
pine for infestation. *What happened to the frogs?*

she asks, as if my Ag-arts degree could afford
eloquent conjecture bearing children couldn't.

I want to tell her I drink the same roads
they drank, losing my life to dark curves.

Same dead-end nights, bingeing to inoculate
AM guilt over the fire glazed eyes of Chu Lai.

II.

Tonight, two deer freeze beyond the guardrail
of a narrow bridge, pumping stars through

foamed-wet nostrils. Irises honeyed halogen.
I watch them from open window, rounding

Dead Man's Curve as I light another joint.
A daisy-mottled fawn and its mother, blinking

in unison across the creek bank, movements
so synchronic they seem mechanical. Until

they break full lope over fifty-year barbwire,
blaze past posted signs as if hurdling air.

Autumn Moonrise

Was it not you who climbed my shoulder
in a dream of blue ridges, opal
full as a light I can't find anywhere?

When I closed my fist over the heart
of a slain deer to fit the creases of your palm,
was it not your dying I fired from the long hill?

Was it not you naked under a brown leaf
pretending to be a footstep?

Big Two-hearted Circle

Only a raven could have noticed
the jelly sack of eggs knifed loose
in the stream, loping over ledges
 staircases of wind.

Miraculously they thaw suspended
in shelves of ice when the dorsal ridge
tingles awake and two-chambered heart fires
through the melt. They're never dead as you think.
I've caught entire schools peering out the cardboard
of my deepfreeze from arctic depths, crystalline palaces
where orcas dream of ice through a perforated spout.

My brother and I fish long hours in the streams
we floated twenty years earlier on vacations
to Cherokee, where we climbed into rubber duckies
and slipped down the rocks as mountains flowed by.
Places have a way of calling people. The mountains
we thought we'd long passed circling back to now
we wade the rocks searching eddies and shaded pools,
always upstream, despite what Nick Adams said,
 piling water is also good.

We fish late, now, well into night and ride the curves
with beer, cook our fish on a rock firepit under tulip
poplar, smoke rising out of the cracks. We don't talk much
about the heart attack our father had last January. Reminds
us too much where we're headed. Same as the fish. Even
these mountains, washing into sea before our eyes.

I hooked a fifteen-inch brown last night.
She rose behemoth, roused like a log
out of stone sleep, jerked the treble free
at arm's length, sacrificing a bit of lip,
a morsel of eye for the lucky.

It was a kind of birth, slick longitude writhing
in the grip of trumpeting light, muscled slab
beating its tiny breath against a cradle of sky.

I laid her on the ground and whetted the fillet
knife on a stone I kept in my belt, then the leather.
I worked the blade into the soft belly skin, slit
her and scooped the vitals out with two fingers
dipped her in the river and rinsed the ribs clean,

the roped innards and pebble-sized heart slipping
downstream as dusk gathered high on the ridge.

I considered how it might be
having your entrails funnel wildly
down the rock, navigating unseen
stars, spilling over edges of earth
through the pitch pupils of circling
crows, disembodied gills steaming
in the falling night air, circling
the bends back to the heart
of a great shimmering bear.

Army Man

They lived in a little white house
when his dog ran away
to live with the Indians.

His mother took him
on long walks beyond
the new highway being built
through the sunken mounds
of bone and flint. She held
his hand, said, "*see?*
The new road."

They flew kites
in spring her hair
smelled like lemons.

He never wanted to go
overseas and shoot anyone.

Backbeat

Two naked skins writhe on the backseat,
joined at the mouth like diamondbacks.

Windshield blanks the white sky.
A southbound Buick pours chrome

over the glass above her, matchbox
silver, smaller, smaller beyond the pine.

I can't make out his tattoo. Is it a scar?
Astrology burnt in the skin like crucifix?

His square-toed boots latch at the buckles
his hand slides between her thighs.

She stiffens, goes limp. The radio
plays soft. I can't hear the tune.

The black dot of bird vanishing
on the telephone wire

suggests
Leonard Cohen.

The double barrel lanes blasting
semis toward Jacksonville

point to *Blood*
on the Tracks.

Motel vacancy winking golden
horseshoes above his fistful

shock of raven hair screams
rock-and-roll summer, 1955.

The pink Caddy flaps its wings toward
statuette flamencos of the half-acre

floodlight she will live inside
twenty years from now.

Rain smatters holes
in August heat.

They are almost
safe. Pine rosined

sky drips red sun
through the nickel slot

of a blue highway sign
for Memphis.

I want to reach through the rearview,
tap him on the shoulder, nod
to the sunset, whisper

go slow.

Song of the Dark Child

I suppose she could have clenched a fist when the moon
sank, drawing gravity upward from Earth. The wrought iron
rail was fairly stable, though she got this twitch drifting to sleep,
remembering the battalion of horses, their scent—

Hooves, black and scissoring.
Loping, lassoing fury, eager as
butterflies, pale sweet summer
going to seed all around.

Night is sultry thick here
cicadas bore into your thoughts,
armies of lonely pine march the dark
on slow Gulf breeze wild roses bloom
for the dead. Broad-necked live oaks lean
against the moon, swaying green and poison
in their garland of moss, so lovely with night,
so looming. Cruel things have happened here;
the slow rot of cottonmouths gets on your skin
you cannot wash it off, you cannot get away.

But in satellite image or walking on the moon
perhaps performing her nightly act of levitation,
she knew the continent morphed into the shape
of a slain bison, Mexico, the limp curled legs;
Canada, the head, bushing horns along
the Bearing Straight, heart bulging
somewhere over Rocky Mountains,
snowed over and white
with everything lost—

When she was a girl
there were wolves
in the shadows.

Don't you want to come play,
little girl, come play?

I don't know why she ever had such trouble
waking to the splintering light, when
it was always the push, the letting go,
first wild instant of absolute inertia
which truly terrified her.

Wild Horses

She weaved the silver buckles of her motorcycle jacket
 between billiard greens like a lioness, flat nose and cat eyes
 prowling the bass-littered haze of Marlboro and reefer savannah
 in black theatrics before the curtain was drawn and Elizabethan
 tragedy bowed to reality T.V., text monologues, Facebook drama.

I know now she held night in her eyes like a lonely hunter
 '66 Mustang keys jangling on her hip to buck the world
 into an oblivion
 time and horses couldn't roll back.

*Ten years ago I flew her out to Montana
 I remember how close the walls felt, breathing
 together in that twelve-by-twelve cabin we slept,
 trying to roll and kick our way back to that bar.
 To the night she lay across my hood and confessed
 things about her father, screaming at the stars, God
 if He was up there. What else could we do but drive
 down to the river, sleep on the banks, listen to birds
 sing the world awake again, mist rolling back
 the sun like a heavy stone laid over all truth.*

*We drove through sunrise to the Spokane airport,
 and I stood in the lobby watching the escalator
 carry her away into clouds. The last I saw of her
 was the calfskin boots touching her like saddle
 leather, clinging to the only horse it ever knew.
 Two brown bears eased above the overpass
 just as I crossed the state line into Idaho,
 climbing for what seemed like an eternity
 into the high snow terrain they'd winter.*

The Stones were playing on the jukebox.
 Somebody sank a shot. A head was split
 into cantaloupe across a trailer hitch
 under the polluted mosquito light of Buick
 spokes and reefer smoke.

You wanna dance? I said.
With who? Dance to where?
 Just here. With me.
*Nothing is ever so actual,
 or confined.*

Well, you want to?

What if I said you look like trouble.
Maybe I am.
Come on. If you're not afraid of dying
Maybe I'm not.
I mean before you're dead.

Rabbit Fur Coat

Every Christmas kids at school would brag
What gifts their fathers bought their mothers.

A sparkling two karat diamond anklet one said.
A sky blue Lincoln Continental said another.

A cruise to the Bahamas said an ocean-blond girl.
Gen-u-ine mink in a red satin box from Macy's.

But there'd be this shy kid who'd get quiet
During these contests, these false testaments.

Tommy, the ocean girl would say, giggling.
A small bronzed hand over her mouth.

And what did old Saint Nicky bring your mommy?
Bath towels? A vacuum? Steak knives from Penny's?

So Tommy would stare at his shoes.
Invent something far better than the truth.

The Craft of Poetry

You want to know how to write a poem?
Drive down to Pinky's Liquor outside of Ft. Worth,
Texas, where Joe Ely used to hitch rides.
Forget money. Stand out in the desert until
a car comes by and says, get in. Shove your work
into a knapsack and ride off to San Francisco
with nothing to lose except time and your career.
As your beloved spins loosely into sleep, waiting
for your fingers through a pillowcase, ride away
on a buckskin stallion across snowed over Raton,
then gamble away his moonlit green eyes in a game
of five card stud. Take your saddle and hitchhike
back to Austin with a renegade Navajo who
carries in his wallet a yellow slip of paper he says
he's been running from since before you were born.
Ask him what this slip of paper means. Wait
for him to breathe hard liquor into your head
and ask why you think it matters.

Two Kinds of Poetry

The first:

Lives its life through what the poet can pick up, hold,
say: this thing has to do with the other thing I picked
up and held. A poetry of castaway objects.
A music box no longer plays. This poetry tells
of its engravings. Tracing the scent of its lover,
this poetry sings of a lost earring.

Play this tape backward through your childhood
when finally you're strapped in a chair, waiting
on the switchman to turn, raise his right arm,
heave blankness at a cinderblock ceiling
and you'll discover

The second:

Lions run through fields, wolves talk
to fire. You dream of snow. Wonder
how Jesus forgave Pilate. How Buddha lived
inside a white elephant. You wonder about Adam
and Eve. You wonder about the stranger who saw
one square foot of sky before the guillotine rolled
his head into oblivion. You think very lucidly
and without hesitation that it's exponentially better
to be scalped by spring grizzlies at the foot of Denali
than die from Doppler contusions at a trailer park
in Bessemer, Alabama.

I Have a Dream

It was me that sent him down there to stay
 with Uncle Mose. Roy Bryant say Emmett
 got fresh with his wife, let a finger slip down
 the back of her hand, suggesting what Negro
 never supposed to suggest to no white woman
 at no store owned by no white man in Money,
 Mississippi. The FBI men who investigated
 say Bryant and his half-brother showed up
 to Mose's at 2:30 AM, dragged Emmett from
 the bed and drove into the dark, and the FBI
 told how many times they smote his body, how
 many different ways they brought the pistol down
 across his face, and the angle the .45 slug went in
 how they strapped a cotton gin fan around his neck
 with barbwire and dumped his body in Tallahatchie.
 They dredged him up waterlogged and bloated
 reshaped into some clay

no longer mine
 no longer God's
 something they made.

Mose say all the young Negro children who had only
 hunger, hell, and the Devil, now have the greatest fear—

not knowing how
 to save themselves being lynched
 because of not knowing
 how to keep from being
 Negro

But I have a dream

Emmett slips loose of that barbwire and
 that cotton gin fan spins on down to the bottom
 without his body. In my dream he calls my name
 climbs up the back steps onto the porch.
 And his mama wakes and goes to her baby
 breathes every ounce of light inside her,
 every ounce of light in that house, every ounce
 of light in every cross her people ever prayed
 since they sailed the Middle Passage

I have a dream

she breathes light
till the bruises recede
 like moonlight reshaped

into the true face
 the face half hers
 half his father's

and none of theirs.

Pure American Brother

The night they came for me I stood at the door and said
 well, who is it? Are you him, they said. Maybe, I said,
 breathing like a deer who knows the trigger's been pulled.
 I could hear the handcuffs clink at their hips. I could feel
 the gunmetal, lonely 38s, needing to be unsheathed.

Last night's song still played in my head, *bey gunner man that's quicksand*—
 I stood there breathing life I'd held in my hand fifty times, though
 I didn't know at the time a dying deer was no different from a dying man;
 it was just a matter of who held the gun.

Jesus, I thought, it was only a fistfight. He touched my face.
 He accused me. Pointed and said, you don't *know*. I told him
 with my fist that I did. We were on the stairs below
 my room. Women were half naked and music was going,
 Hey kid you think that's oil
 man that ain't oil that's blood
 I wonder what he was thinking when he hit that storm
 or was he just lost in the flood?

I'd read too much Marx. Didn't love anything
 American but the blues. The Sioux, the Blackfeet.
 The sharecropper, hands that worked, or had,
 so much they'd quit, said, naw, hoss, can't no more,
 and lived homeless with a grocery cart, devastated over
 discarded tooth brushes in labyrinth west wing garages.

My mind flashed back as they cocked the hammer and waited
 behind the door for the ten-second dream I lived in to end:

They'd mined the bituminous out of West Virginia and taxied
 our fathers across the Pacific to shoot farmers who slept in huts.
 I'd invite a homeless bucket player to the top floor pool deck
 of a French Quarter Hotel to get high on the government
 before I'd piss on a burning banker. America is a prospector
 who rides to the moon on the lithium balloon of pack mules,
 I'd say. A venture capitalist who needs police like I need
 Jesus, to prop his face upright while the rest of him
 goes off climbing toward gods that don't exist in the sense
 he thinks they do. Forget the parachute, motherfucker,
 I said. You're already dead.

We got a warrant, they said, on the other side of the
 Universe from the carpet I stood on. You can open
 the door, or we can bust it down. I'd spent a hundred

nights in that attic fog, soaking in a tub, waiting
on my affair to arrive with cheap Bordeaux and a bag
of tricks that belonged only to us. I'd sit there
looking at the plaster, watching my toes wrinkle.
I'd stare down my reflection in the faucet and wonder
where it was all headed. I asked her once in their bed
if he came back and found us, would he shoot?

Interstate Child

What you dream about is catching the speed limit
for good. Semi lights thunder past your temple
and you need billboard signs for direction.
It's so easy to follow words, a written truth
you could drive toward. Sometimes you get
exactly the message you need on a license
plate—Montana. Texas. A fat man
in a neon wife beater squats with a lug
wrench. You blast by, but see miraculously
as you fly past at seventy-five m.p.h. that
God is more precise than you ever imagined—
little ones cub out of the cab and you see
that you don't know anymore where the
border is or if you've crossed it already.

But you've lived with an artery in your ear
while the little peach towns fell asleep and
dreamed of sailors in white suits on the decks
of ships who had nowhere to go but a museum.

You hit the brakes and stop.
They come to you like water.
But you've emptied your canteen
forty miles back on a pay-by-the-hour
bed in Dallas. Help? you utter, fumbling
to conjugate verbs you never learned.
They shake their heads, flashing silver
phones like pesos, laughing wide
as the hills above Rio Grande.

Spirits in the Night

We drove around all day, bruised by liquor
 into the Blue Ridge. It rises quicker than
 you think, swerves around a curve and strikes
 like a pigmy rattler, jaws wide, intoxicant.
 It could swallow you up on the right night.
 We ate barbecue while the kids slid down
 a flat rock with reckless abandon and breasts
 spilled out of trout slick bikini tops. If I was
 that boy, I'd fall against her wet body while I
 could get away with it, then float out of sight
 into the laurel and dare the adults to come
 take back the dignity I was born in.

Years later, that same shy, towheaded boy
 steers the fogged curves of some high road,
 slips in an album as black rock and spruce
 stratify into short infinity, and the singer
 was born in Louisiana, but sings he'll tear
 down every prayer his mother can say,
 because his home is in the Blue Ridge mountains
 and he aint' going back there anymore,
 but that's not all—The moon is low and the boy
 who was once a man keeps falling, climate after climate
 toward the city, and finally he stops on the side of a ridge
 overlooking the lights, and the folk singer says to the boy
 that he's gone to sleep and dreamed a song, waken
 in a strange room and played it across the street
 at a bar who paid him with booze. And the boy
 says, I wonder if I could do that. Two voices hit his heart
 like nighttime heat, though he doesn't hear because he's trained
 to live only in the brain. The first says, this mountain
 is you, there's nothing else. The second says,
 what he said is bullshit, keep driving.

What the Tide Demands

I have a dream some nights the moon floats up
 over my shoulder behind me. But I can see it
 back there above. White and cold, shimmering
 like a startled eye. Pharmaceutical-grade
 lucidity from the holiest lab.

I'm fighting my addiction
 in a dark window. I get angry
 and say just what I think I need
 to clean up this act.

Clean up, man. Get clean. Quit being dirty,
 damning, accusing. Just stop, I shout, trembling.
 Stop blaming Andromeda for nebulae you keep
 inventing. All by yourself, I point to the sky.
 Nobody out there but you.

My addiction gets quiet. Bows its head to one side,
 goes limp, swims the dark like a drunk fish in the sky.

Hey, I say. Don't take it so bad. The truth can't kill you.
 But my addiction doesn't raise its head, or hear anymore.
 Just gets real still, refuses to move. Look, I say.

We all have to face up sooner or later. To our own bullshit.
 You hear? I shrug, I nudge him. I slap his flimsy shoulder.
 Don't go to sleep when I'm saying something. Listen.
 You lift up. But he doesn't lift. His head just rolls
 up there in the sky, like a loose boulder, or a melon

on a severed vine.

Other times, when I'm clean, the moon passes
 behind a deep blue cloud still enough to illuminate
 its appearance to an arresting visage carved of light,
 benign lucidity that calls to me in some way.

Quantum Gravity

There's a theory the body can die
defiantly alive, unified
blot of tugging particles,
smeared
on the Event
Horizon, which is like a spillway
of memory's singularity
decoded, the waking dream,
waking to mourn
its own
fractured absence—

what kind of new die
is this, that splits
us in two realms
of old suffering?

Rumi says, "gamble
everything for love,"
whirl
the musty rags
of your unknowing, until
knowing grasps, wholly,
the fleeting
fragrance of veils.

21st Century Dali

The dancer careens like a broken violin in blue sequence,
elegant, obelisk nightfall, the female twin before the plane hits
the fifth lumbar, spilling all her secret drawers—
Parisian toiletries, red lace bodices, 401Ks, offshore investments,
a lifetime of suicide notes aborted on the desert floor.

She glides her arms wide to embrace her invisible partner
in this tango with death. Tilts her head to offer a breast
backward to the scaffolding that props her at the elbows—
begins to marionette, though her eyes dream charcoal without
paper, as if she had no traceable face.

Miro's Bull Race

It is a strange bull
with horns like a boat
sharp on one end, the bow.

The bovine eyes do not blink
or move
in the sockets
only death
fire black armband
without number.

Moon is its matador,
plump gluttonous
medieval gesture
cavaliering in a gray soup.

It is no criticism
I would like more ovulation.
The blood seems octagonal
ochre
imprisoned

the chalklines—may I say—
remind me of yellow tape
too rectilinear
for the missing body.

Quilt Horse

At dinner a timer sounds, fizzing
through the halls and musty rooms,

pantries

where soup cans wait on the gears that will grind
their lids, drain the stewed tomato its jailed blood

Time will fizz through the shadow of the adult
who will come stoop in the doorway with a hand

on each hip, insisting the horse be folded
packed and returned

to its cedar box with the rest of its makings,
the spindle-back chair slid back

under the kitchen table where it must live, ribbed,
quadrupedal, beneath the doily and the silverware.

A Lifting of Bread

1.

Alone, she passes room to room, kneading
the dough, mashing yeast into loaves. On TV

a program about copious galaxies beyond, narrated
in the voice of surrender you imagine love to be,

a voice unadorned as grief, without bloom or root
to attach its weight, only space, tumbling as though

all weightless falling might rise again in the leavened
heart of bread, shaped by the tumult of a secret gravity

trumpeting multitudes in a sky of wheat she leans, opens
the oven door like a drawer to the universe, expectant

meteors shower magma shadow across the living walls,
while outside the moon waits chained to its light, calling,

calling the yeast. Supple aroma of loaves,
grain to nourish the hearths and tables.

It's a lucid night with no rain in the forecast for weeks.
Her figure passes in the window, eyes iced blue as planets,

distant crystal seas frozen impenetrable. Her heart's
in Rio. Mine's on a flight anywhere far from here.

Maybe some night they'll pass beneath the moon
like red eclipse realizing its passage the first time.

2.

Faraway in a city atop the hemisphere a kind of thief
steals his way to an unsuspecting cinema and takes lives.

Do people just wake some day and forget they're loved?
Maybe she bakes to invent joy no one can rob. Or maybe

between silent voyages to the kitchen she flies trembling
to a gemmed street in Paris after the one grief that could.

But it's a lucid sky when I bite into this bread she's left
on my doorstep like a fuse of savory air set loose from stars,

solid, simple gravity brought to nourish
night's hunger with its entire weight.

Ritual of Wheat

She wraps the bread in cellophane so thin
I can feel the mounds, ridges, rove a palm
along the startled eyes of figs, pears, dates,
whatever succulence she favors when she's
of a mood to stir her bowl of yeast and wheat,
laboring love high in the kitchen window, shaping,
kneading, prodding her white pilgrim of dough
to a shape of land, a risen breath of earth.

Does she wear gold rings during this ritual,
smack the dough and lick bran from her
fingers? Leave me all, I say, all she can
heave into her lonely oven of clouds.

Let me come to my mailbox at noon
and find savory figs, exotic grains, stark
naked to air, October sea of blue Midwestern
piling warm stone onto shoulders of the world, high
bright vigil of corn and wheat and straw flung down,
down from some secret hidden box onto this wind-born
plain, washed aground on separate islands, she north,
I south—this understood boundary only
the clandestine wheat may cross.

Amanita Virosa

Upend a stone and you may find her
germinating the gardens at Gethsemane.

A pale mutiny in the splintered light
of stockyards

barnacled lotus among the leprous
blood of radish peels, fungal white
flame in the tumescent seed gut

of a tomato's heart.

Audubon Field Guide to Mushrooms says,
"she is tacky when wet, smooth, dull
to shiny white and may discolor
at center of cap with age."

Strikingly beautiful, she is found alone, or
in a small, scattered group. She is deadly.

"Severe nausea, vomiting, cramps, kidney
or liver dysfunction, without treatment
she may result in death." Jaunts
a wide, grievous brim, with a veil
to shade her gills' ribbed toxicity
from full sun—long, fragile stem
widowed beneath the weight of air,
as if the faintest mote of descending
light would topple her delicate rigidity
in-two, rupture her membranous

basal bulb.

She constitutes the group of
deadly amanitas; also known as

the Destroying Angel.

Through the hawthorn skull gray
November scuds itself translucent
as her bridal veil drops

flinging her spore to the moon.

The Environmentalists

The city grew crowded, year after year, more polluted, congested.
 So the man and his wife decided to look for a spot in the Greens.
 They loved long walks along the fresh stone creeks, the sweet
 mountain air, and they knew on one of these trips, they'd find
 just the right property.

Real estate in Vermont has always been a seller's market,
 their agent explained. That made it a sound investment.

The couple loved their new home. They'd made good choices
 every step of the way. From the compact florescent lighting
 to the wood burning stove, and most importantly, the foot-thick
 insulation, the triple-pane glass that would keep them safe, warm
 in the coming New England winter.

Saturdays of their first autumn in the Greens, the couple went on lazy,
 winding drives along the river banks to take in the dizzying fall color.
 But year after year, they began to notice plates from nearly every state.
 Indiana. Alabama. New York was very common. Texas. Missouri.
 Even an occasional Hawaii. It bothered them to see so many outsiders
 in their mountains.

Can you imagine? the wife said. Ferrying a car across the Pacific to
 drive from one gift shop to the next? They stopped at their favorite café
 for a latte and found the wait unusually long. Impatient, the couple shook
 their heads and walked out. It was the first time the sleigh bell above
 the door had ever annoyed the wife. On the drive home, she glared
 out the Subaru window, shaking her head in disbelief at all the motorists.

They act as if nothing is wrong, she said. As if everything is okay.
 As if we weren't in a crises. She looked at her husband and waited
 for an answer. But he only gripped the wheel, took a deep breath,
 let it back out very slowly, and looked away from her, to a cement
 table beside the river, where a young mother had opened her blouse
 to breastfeed, while a boy in a gray cap tossed a ball in the air.

Grand Canyon of the Pacific: A Brochure

In the left-hand corner, just below the gaping lush vista
a sleek, assuring voice echoes from the border, "Slow Down
and adjust to island life. Come join us for rest and relaxation
at Kauai's Waimea Canyon." Cool lime splashes of botanical
flurry bubble over opposite rims, shelving ledges like molten leaf,
unwinding along the river canyon toward the sea. Halfway down,
water and wind have shaped igneous folds into an abstract animal skull
which appears to guard the ravine, peregrine nose arching regal, defiant—
on either side, two caved depressions like closed eyes culled blackly in the rock,
as if any second the sleeping beast might awake to swallow the sea.

Tigers Found Dead in Omaha

Along the rutted roads of central Iowa crops climb the sun
 in military formation, row after row, geometrically calculated,
 genetically engineered, scientifically formulated to blot out
 everything on the horizon but Sioux ghosts scudding across
 the pale Midwestern blue like great floating bison herds, slate
 thunderclouds churning yellow August light, as if the arthritic
 fingers of a dead midwife come alive in the branches has given
 birth to the murders upon murders of crows who assail winter
 sidewalks for breadcrumbs when the fields are slashed for silage
 left fallow on the prairie tundra with its nightly dream
 of antiseptic fronts, gusts that kill from inside out.

But for amusement you can drive your family four hours west
 to see the Siberian tigers of Omaha, the world's largest cats,
 the only breeding captives in North America. And they'll walk
 you and your beloved up to the cage and let you point and make
 primate faces and ape your arms and hold your hairless babies
 high to the perimeter fence until their cheeks crumple into violet
 beet skins sobbing for I-phones and bottle milk until their eyes
 turn placid and recede like the Snows of Kilimanjaro, every breath
 backward into some vague Pleistocene repose.

The zoologists will go on to explain how the big male Siberian
 clawed the stripes off a plaster model they put inside its fence
 to test the territorial rites, mating zones, complications involved
 in getting the pair to unite successfully. In captivity, they'll explain,
 the mother commonly abandons her young.

They found her two newborns emaciated, rare snowy
 flames manged with neglect, ribcages sunken to a slow
 heartbeat above the swollen tiger paunches.

But it's not just these two cubs who are dying,
 the biologists will explain, it's the entire population.
 And you'll instinctively click a few telling frames and
 upload them immediately, so there is a record at least,
 some documentation of their demise.

Man Kneeling at a Rock

A man walked to a rock
he thought was a good start
and knelt
in the Buffalo Grass
above an old wallow, soft
beneath the ball
of his knee

With hammer and chisel
the man looked across the wide sky
from this rock he'd found
to a high spot
where he thought there might be another
and another
that would satisfy him.

Mountaintop Removal

the mountain sleeps,
naked, with a hand
over a great heart, gasping
dreaming allegiances, counting
minced sheep, mining
the bones of a century
coughing
the black cough of draglines,
midnight shovels.

always, a hand

over a great heart, she sleeps,
with the courage of a spider,
lowering eight miraculous feet
to forage the leveled
plateau, where
every second
a false seed sprouts
its alien shrubbery.

El Dorado

Two riders mirage
 in and out of shape
 on high Bolivian
 sand, saddling pickaxes
 shovels, the magnetic
 pull of a new god.

Mayan descendants
 whisper from ruins
 having trailed the foreign
 scent through Guatemala
 sensing, knowing this
 beast has become
 no different than
 the gringo steel
 angling like stars
 in its swayback.

Vaqueros surround
 the riders on sun-scorched
 pampas, silver-winged and
 mask-less as a flock
 of Coscoroba swans:

Caballero?
 Si. From the North.
 Americano?
 Si. No politico.

We are merely traveling.
 And her? She also?

(To the horse.)

Si. Her as well.
 We are one.

(As the gauchos
 trade secrets.)

Let us pass –
 we have nothing
 we have
 only the road.

(They look again
from horse to man.)

We could buy more cattle,
but they carry no money.

Take the horse, kill them.
They're worth nothing.
Why let them live?

De nada. A spirit
is no good to kill

two breaths
travelling with
a face of one
ghost

(They nod
in agreement.)

Go, then. Ride
(They slap the horse
as gringo centaurs
fade into dry seabed.)
Cabarello! Be swift!

But gringo—
if you can see
past the imagined
lungs of this horse
you ride

pray to the sky

the god you look for
dies at the end
of this world

in the Andes

with puma
and the snow.

Cut Branch

After trains
antlered shadows
give their ghosts
to the pine.

Whatever the deer taught me
I've forgotten. How to lose
the last skin
of velvet
in time
for rut.

I no longer hear the Rosewood
And the Solingen braiding
cut-mark in the green. Low always
for balance, tempered by fire
the wood won't split; I was no boy scout.
I needed a father

outpacing the Cheyenne over a suicide
butte, proud as any
light of hoof
in the white cloud of a runaway Chevy.

Nothing epic—
straight bender, unholstered
and loaded through one eye
of Tequila worm—a start
west anyhow.

We never blamed you; just weathered
the call, half-sober at least, and collect.

I believed in lassos then.
It couldn't last, I know that.
Each lope and hoof upon water
must converge, linger
long before a kitchen window
at dusk, threading
the latch, nightly,
in time, always in time.

Voice

The tape rolls. You come crackling through a hole in the smoke. You are nineteen, load mortars in the dark, watch them leap sandbags, quake in the paddy. You are no officer. Officers don't dig graves with rifle butts when shovels aren't enough. You laugh and tell Corine not to worry. Vietnam is not so bad, your voice, unwinding inside the recorder. The nights steam like riverbottom in August. There's no winter and leaves never turn. You miss woodies and drakes in the sloughs. You miss dark water on your hip through waders, hounds chiming up the branch after deer. You'd like to come home soon. You miss a woman with child, eyes the color of soft fur. In the picture they remind you of Jesus. You say a slur word *dink* that means "little brown people." *Bookoo* means "a lot." I want to press the red button, stop you. Speak through the recorder, lie that I'm a Buddhist, over and over you were never saved in the river with ducks. Bamboo could be canebrake and snakes swallow striped birds along the clay at night. You hear them squeal and thrash inside the leather, dying featherless, holy.

It's November '69, and your favorite song will never be recorded. You don't like Jagger. He has hips like a girl. Richards is okay, Berry was first, better when he's sober. You drink fermented rice in the towns when the American runs dry. Whiskey blazes in back of my throat, I pause another pour. The liter nearly gone, I'll get more, maybe tonight. Father, I had a child, too, by a woman who loved me, though not enough. Love never can be. Not in a trailer, she said. It was snowing when I drove her to Memphis and there were people shoving homemade signs, angry, saying names. No one spat on you. No one called you baby-killer. Army don't fly boys back civilian. There is good reason for this, you will say, falling through the kitchen dark after eight more beers. The tape hisses, raining on the hills above Saigon.

Whiskey helps some nights to remember you are human like any other. The burn always comes to what cannot have been. Together we depend on this. You gave me for my thirteenth the pawnshop Yamaha, smoked in the fires of Chu Lai. It hung above the fireplace ashes, sun-bursting like a phoenix. Father. You're a better man than me, I know when I hear you wail through your hole in the smoke, with Robbie and Leon and Chet. They are good, but you are better for rhythm, whacking the top, backstrum I hardly believe. Your voice comes haunted, rasping, I see fingers lope four legs over the sound-hole, across the paddy, across the sea, to your beloved oak, to the church you will build, before you fall from grace, again, again, again. Father. I'm not your favorite son, I know. I take it all back, what I said. You're a

smarter man than I'll ever be at this goddamn university. I know this when I hear you pray in the evening by windows.

I know a few other things, too, this bottle half-empty, burning through rolls of tape you thought were lost, don't know I've found. You taught me to fight serious. *Don't swing unless you swing to hurt, son, always swing first.* You ate tequila worm, paled, swaying maniacal. Like *this*, you said, shoving holes in the air, killing with a clenched fist. I hit that boy, father. I hit him on the concrete and I can't take it back, you know that. It's our one thing, isn't it? Not the gospel.

I loved you like some god of the hills. Pale blue eye swimming toward deer no one could find. It wasn't like I said the night we fought. How can I tell you the brown eyed son we never had?

Voice. *Dinks live in thatch huts.* Their beautiful babies sleep on claymores that explode in the dark. I've seen their hooches in movies and want worship them. They built them here, too, dad, on the Tippah where you shot ducks, near the mounds you taught me to see them in the water, in the pine, in the red clay, so soft.

They're still here, you said. Look, son. Look harder.

Triple Bypass

We were sent, my brother and I, out fishing,
while our mother wept over the onions,
halved cold turkey into a brown sack
that lugged and thumped our path,
downhill, splitting at the seams.

It was the wet of line made our hands hurt,
numb and cramp, baiting the hook.

Nightcrawlers the color of rained-on turnips,
violet as evening sky beneath their dirt skin,
trying to pump and muscle whatever heart they had
away from the silver barb threading their gut.

The wind was up, and we dropped our baits,
built a stick fire in the sage
to huddle and keep warm, not noticing
the faint spark that spilled over the levee, wild,
flaming like a sheep's yellow eye,
or a talon we never saw.

I know she must have loved once.
We had a motorbike in the carport,
dying beside my father's black Mercury, enamel tank
dovetailed between her thighs,
pale as the underbelly
of a drugged fish.

A bullet weight, one-ounce lead, sunk
deep in a river you are afraid to swim.

I know they must have rode together,
denim thighs straddling vinyl,
from the dust that rose and welted,
gas-powered loins flying the dusk
of wilting honeysuckle.

But we were young and the wind was up
on the frozen pond we had to burst through

to drop our chicken hearts, marinated livers
on a hook-point, wait our turn,
as fire approached. Soon.
One. Two. Three.
Pull. Set. Heave.

Hailstorm

I.

The sky yellowed, we bowed
 our heads from the bluff.
 Ten meters swift the river dark, rising
 one world above the next. Our kneecaps
 shelled mussel. The sky broke and
 vanished in the chemical heat
 of pine pitch, falling
 through the dark, falling.

Elisha was fourteen,
 her voice an orchid
 in the snow, opening itself
 naked in blinding sun.

The hawk shrieked
 shadow across the pine.
 I slipped forth, let go gravity—
 weightless three seconds
 you are neither one hell
 or the other, yours or hers,
 light or shadow. Newton's first
 flies out your stomach
 on page forty-seven.

Never returns, ever. No matter
 how deep you swim, paddling
 blind in the river silt.

II.

Camping Tsalagi bluff
 we skewered a speckled quail
 through its wishbone,
 like the rumors of a blue-eyed virgin
 vanishing in the fogged
 glass of a white van.

Devil dusting the taillights
 because of time.

There was never enough.

III.

When Bobby Long pitched
 his knuckleball .22 hollowpoints
 into the flamed heart of Alabama stars—
 hot long July dark, I knew
 he would die by gunfire,
 the winter before
 his voice cracked, as ours,
 small round stones, dropped
 down the wells
 we would drown in.

Looking out across the pine
 from that Olympic height,
 where witches sail the bluffs
 and black creeks pour lead
 into Union boys' ears
 by midnight we return
 to the shadow kingdom.

No runaway slaves, no satanic cults,
 not in the Free State of Winston,
 which could never decide
 on blue or gray coats, April
 snow or jaundiced, tornadic
 hail blossoms.

Asphalt

The sun browned muscle of her thigh leapt
 into my body like a water bead in the dust.
 Blue-topping Highway 61, my shirt smelled
 of tar. I wanted to wash my history in the mint
 border of antebellum brick, cleanse myself
 in the long deep stream of her old money

I remember

Her mother came in the parlor, icing lily fingers
 over the keys of a baby grand, metronome clicking
 time like a worm in the stars. Bouquets of yellow rose,
 a vase of rain, I could smell the Universe. Her daughter
 breathing gulf breeze through the naked window of night.
 Hair tangled predawn pink, as though a hundred years passed
 from her hips to mine. We tried to lie. The metronome
 clicking time. Zebra keys. Manicured nails. Ivory bones,
 ebony elegance burned off the hills my grandfather shared.

I ran to her nights in the dark, stood outside
 her bedroom, tapping the glass, hard enough
 to wake her, but it was her father who woke
 to chase me off the hill with a shovel, because
 my hands
 were more calloused than his.

Other nights the curtain flung back her nude and the
 lace world I wanted to live in, jasmine of her pillow, soft
 shape where her head had slept, tangled curls of papaya,
 cedar, oranges. Fresh scallops from the sea. Clean silver.
 Blue china I wanted to lick, smash against the hard black sun.
 I stood outside the pane, caulk seal between warm and dark.
 She ran to hole seven in a gown of willow, weeping her pink
 blooms on a cool flat sod where dawn burned back the moon,
 and the spell evaporated in the dry heat of another day I was
 back in, on the crew, pounding hubs into clay. New lanes.

Latest version of the road before. Steamroller
 smoothing it out, over the hill, out of sight.

Song of the Mississippi
for shares
and for debts

You've painted your lashes
 purple smoke
 a chemical experiment
 to knife a long drought and detonate
 sins that never belonged to you.

I know your heart

wore
 threadbare
 on us—

your rare loam,
 your summer elixir,
 your wine brazier
 pinched in levees and locks
 so terrified of altitude
 and the fingerless shadow
 of cloud
 you noose snake-gummed banks
 oily buckets dredged straight
 scarping inward and inward
 afraid of the sky
 wild geese carry floods down to the sea
 to die.

No nightlight could glow opiate enough
 to burn down your lonely city on the bluff;
 no tap dancing for nickels,
 no rattlesnake spurs nor switchblade teddy,
 no cackling band of lady-sawing gorillas,
 no electric flakes of nuclear winter,
 only the mad arms
 of a world sleeping off its sentence,
 poised as scree
 turning
 fractal by fractal
 to salt.

You must have assassinated
 enough lies
 and mosquitoes

to cleave an oxbow
 with the pyramid of Memphis
 hoping we could love you more.
 It was a long way home
 from your mansion in the sky.

Cane and snakes lie down to die
 each autumn
 you bury another soldier.

Queen of mounds,
 Chucalissa,
 rain leaf clay
 root rock blood
 rattle your chains to the sea—

Mud woman, emerge, bear our nation
 of bad dreams to the sea, dream
 your sleep of bombs and detonations:
 A solitary acorn sank the Atlantic;
 you once loved the smell of rain in my hair—
 Lift your mane, dark woman, reveal your aboriginal
 throat
 gurgling
 brass
 sludge
 murk
 moon.

Only the horses can hear you now
 only the blue horses lonely and lost
 in their eternal night of dreams.

You are old
 you are ours
 you are time
 plumbing the cosmos
 for a straight razor.

Earth Day at the Races

We had good seats,
Jameson with a splash
of water on the rocks.

“I never finish
the books I read,
Charlie,” she said.

There aren’t any more horses
to run, only tracks
in the sand
where
the saddle used to be.

I’d like to ride a bison
but they’re all dead
except for the parks.

“Somebody ought to
just shoot us, Charlie,
before we cross
the finish line
and waste
a perfectly good ribbon.”

Anchor

The arms you believed yours
were born as your mother kicked
toes, a head, into bloom. She's
walked with you inside her inside
the earth a gown of forests that
pulsed night breeze into daylight.

You learn to speak a fatalist's
separation. Fight many lifetimes
back to embryonic seas you floated
before you awoke, remembered,
believed you were not her.

Time passes. You don't know yet
its ticking exists only in the invention
of mechanical clocks replicating
a vast spiraling arc better measured
by two beating hearts.

What more could you believe? So far
out on the dark wing of a capillary brain
trying to calculate your way back through
mathematical fire to safety?

Every direction you look
the harbor eludes you—
a wave inside the ocean
that washed you here
is the only shore there
is, or ever could be.

Crow Circling Bones
Downstream

The prophet struts on two twigs
gold and a tassel of cloud, crooning
ore from a gullet, harvesting bones.

In winter he runs trotlines, reeling pike
through portals in the ice, holds trials
in altars of stone, lays wait in the ravine
to crucify an owl, guarding his temple
with a scalped owlet on a stick.

I see him and know he is un-fooled
by the straw likeness we erect of ourselves,
our prosthetic arms akimbo in prairie sun,
littering our small lives with artifacts
washed back to the rain and the sea.

He circles high over the bleached bones
of some animal, black river mud silting
the brainpan, so many fractals, so much
salt, sculpting resistance and non-resistance
toward one body, one sight.

Arrivals and Departures

Disemboweled below
a guardrail off I-40, the dead sow bear
stiffens like a bloated human cadaver,
caught in the act, trying to circus hop
four new lanes of westbound motorcade,
caravan of wheels thundering toward the sun—
high white diamond of the West—
blistering rawhide into cellophane.

The humanlike forepaws
still bend at the elbow,
locked in a thwarted
motion, as if reaching
to waltz on hind legs.

Cargo byways. Incessant stream
of semis loaded with lettuce and potatoes,
the "Beautify America" poppies
wavering rich-red in the wake.
Dance, they seem to say,
faster, faster.

Top Kill

We stood offshore
 holding a single breath
 a hundred miles of shoreline
 skimmed off the top
 in a shrimping net

a blue emergency
 blinking
 out on the dark wide

curvature
 beyond

the cue-cards
 the teleprompters
 we knew

something had been eclipsed entire
 moons jerked under, capsized.

It occurred to me
 even wind even the dead
 require a certain gravity
 a certain slant of light.

To the coastguard
 we must have looked like catfish
 beached way down on the levee

winking half alive
 out of a dead dust.

I can still feel the concussion
 smooth taut holy in its way.

Petrol jellied by-product
 turtles without shells
 frogs without eyelids.

*What happened to all the little animals? she said.
 Will Jesus come clean up the mess? Will he daddy?
 Laura, baby, Moses didn't part the Red Sea
 with a shrimp net and a stale beignet.
 Daddy, is it just for summer, Daddy?*

I Am Her Voice
 Echoing off the Walls
 of God

Night or day
 no matter

Crabapple blossoms
 snowmelt into rivers

She is naked earth
 spinning all directions

breath dreaming blood
 through one heart pumping

spirit back through stars
 in ceaseless cohabitation

Two bodies enter
 cosmic mind's
 pure sky bliss

Perfect yin-yang unity
 this mind-body-spirit
 unfolding

within without

this leaf
 breath could not
 form clouds

could not bloom
 red salmon dusk

Moon dance is sun dance
 unconditional eternal

Yielding one true path
 she carries our child

from before time

The Unearthed

In the sharp bend of a
sand bar, washed aground
in the last good flood, a child
unearthed a skull and wondered
about comings and goings,
the contour of bone.

The child noted how the sun had burned
the marrow into chalk much like the sand
on which its skull had come to rest. The child
fingered the sockets and the smooth place where
the mechanics had come unhinged, lower mandible
no longer bound in sinew and in blood.

Later, after stars,
the child returns
to shovel with cupped hands
a small pocket in the sand,
and slides his discovery
gently out of sight.